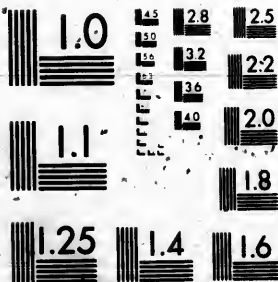


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Cort, Cyrus.

Woman preaching viewed in the light
of God's word and church history / by
Cyrus Cort. [Philadelphia : Reformed
Church Publication Board, 1882]

p. 123-130 ; 23 cm.

Caption title.

Extracted from The Reformed quarterly
review, Vol. 29, January, 1882.

Microfiche (master negative).
Beltsville, Maryland : Reproduced by
the NCK Corporation, for the American
Theological Library Association Board
of Microtext, 1978. -- 1 sheet ; 10.5 x
14.8 cm. -- (Women and the church in
America ; 8) (ATLA F2008)

Original in the Princeton
Theological Seminary Library.

ISBN 0-8370 -0713-5 : \$1.50

ATLA 11 MAY 78 3885835 ATLCme SEE NEXT CRD

Cort, Cyrus.

Woman preaching viewed in the light
... [1882] (Card 2)

1. Women as ministers. 2. Woman
(Theology)--Biblical teaching.
I. Title II. Series: Women and the
church in America ; 8

ATLA 11 MAY 78 3885835 ATLCme

ART. VII.—WOMAN PREACHING VIEWED IN THE LIGHT OF
GOD'S WORD AND CHURCH HISTORY.

BY REV. CYRUS CORT.

THE right of woman to preach and pray in public before promiscuous assemblies has always been denied by the great body of orthodox and evangelical Christendom. The Quakers have had a majority of female preachers for several generations. The Unitarians and Universalists have shown special favor toward the innovation. It was estimated two years ago that about one hundred female preachers and evangelists were then laboring in different parts of the United States, and chiefly among the heterodox sects just mentioned.

The spirit of the times seems rather favorable to the innovation. Denominations which were inflexibly opposed to the ministrations of women in the sanctuary a generation ago are beginning to relax in the vigor of their prohibition, and now countenance public speaking and praying of women in a way that would have scandalized our orthodox forefathers. The question arises, are we wiser on this subject than the ancients or are we countenancing a dangerous innovation by recognizing the right of women to preach, pray and exhort before promiscuous assemblies? For my own part I am obliged to adopt the latter alternative. After a careful examination of the subject in the light of God's word I am compelled to endorse most emphatically the deliverance of the Presbyterian Church on this topic in 1832. "Meetings of pious women by themselves for conversation and prayer we entirely approve." But let not the inspired prohibition of the great Apostle, as found in his epis-

tle to the Corinthians and to Timothy be violated. To teach and to exhort or to lead us in prayer, in public promiscuous assembly, is clearly forbidden to women in the holy oracles."

Whether or not our Presbyterian friends are consistently maintaining that position in all their congregations we are not prepared to decide just now. But of one thing we feel confident, viz.: It is the only position which can be successfully maintained in the light of God's word and the history of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Woman preaching and praying in promiscuous assemblies is a modern and unscriptural innovation and a perversion of Apostolic and Christian usages. As such it can only be injurious in its ultimate results.

The Ohio Synod of the Reformed Church in 1842 formally disapproved of women praying aloud in promiscuous assemblies or prayer meetings.

St. Paul was the champion of evangelical freedom, the most progressive and liberal of all the Apostles. He vindicated the right of the Gentile converts to be incorporated into the Church of the New Testament without first passing through the portals of Judaism.

If Christianity was to mark a new departure from the established customs of the Jewish Church on this subject St. Paul would have been pre-eminently the one to enunciate and emphasize the new departure. But where do we find the great Apostle of the Gentiles ranging himself on this question? Not in favor of the right of women to preach or pray in public religious services. On the other hand his epistles furnish the classic passages on the opposite side.

Nothing could be more explicit and emphatic than the teachings of St. Paul on this subject. "Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak. * * It is a shame for women to speak in the church." "Let the women learn in silence with all subjection. I suffer not a woman to teach or usurp authority over the man but to be in silence." See 1 Cor. 14, 34: &c. 1 Tim. 2: 11, &c. We

could not prohibit women from preaching in language more plain and positive than that here employed by the Apostle Paul.

He positively forbids women from preaching or speaking in public promiscuous assemblies of the church. If we believe in the inspiration of St. Paul and that the New Testament must be taken as our infallible guide in matters of Christian faith and practice we must oppose woman preaching as a dangerous innovation. Few have the hardihood to call in question the plain meaning of the passages just quoted as they stand by themselves and in their connexion. But there are some professing Christians who try to break the force of these passages by quoting others, which they suppose relate to the same subject. They violate fundamental rules of scriptural interpretation and throw discredit upon the Apostolic teaching by striving to prove that St. Paul allows in one place what he repeatedly forbids in other places. Distinct and positive passages must always rule the meaning of passages that are vague, indirect and doubtful in their meaning and application.

Thus when Paul tells us in the eleventh chapter of First Corinthians that "every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoreth her head," we are not to infer as some do that Paul admits the right of woman to pray and prophesy or preach provided she has proper covering for her head. If that were a correct and necessary inference then St. Paul would flatly contradict, in the 14th chapter of this epistle, what he taught or permitted in the eleventh, and the whole question would be involved in confusion.

Paul was not so careless or unsound a reasoner as that. His writings, on this point especially, are in all respects logical and consistent. If we read the eleventh chapter carefully we will see that he nowhere teaches or admits that it is right and proper for woman to pray or prophesy in public promiscuous assemblies either with or without a veil or covering to her head. He says that even nature teaches that it is unbecoming for her to pray or prophesy with uncovered head, but he does not say or admit that she has a right to pray or prophesy at all in the

church. He is there discussing more particularly the matter of dress and the relation of the sexes and not the matter of preaching itself. It was an utter violation of the rules of modesty and female subordination for a woman to pray or prophesy publicly in that manner. Afterwards in the fourteenth chapter, when he comes to the subject of preaching itself and the conduct of public worship, he emphatically forbids woman to speak in the church at all, and declares in the next verse that "It is a shame for woman to speak in the church."

Calvin compares 1 Cor., 11: 4, with 1 Cor., 14: 34, &c., and significantly remarks *apostolus unum improbando alterum non probat*. In condemning the one thing the Apostle does not approve of the other. In censuring particularly the form and manner of the act he does not thereby necessarily say or admit that the act itself would be right and proper under any circumstances. For instance, a minister might say that it is very unbecoming for a set of men or boys to come stalking along the church aisle engaged in boisterous conversation with their hats on during divine service. By such a remark he would not admit that it would be right and proper for them to engage in such conversation with their hats off. So St. Paul, in condemning women for praying and preaching with uncovered head, does not admit their right to pray or preach at all in promiscuous assemblies.

The passage in the 11th chapter does not contradict or modify the emphatic and distinct deliverance in the 14th chapter.

Obscure and doubtful passages must always be explained and understood in the light of passages that are plain and unmistakable in their meaning. It is irreverent trifling with the word of God to try to set aside such passages as 1 Cor. 14: 34, etc., 1 Tim., 2: 11, etc., with no better scriptural warrant for so doing than a mere inference drawn from an argument relating to another subject. And that is what the advocates of woman preaching are constantly doing. The practice of both the Jewish and Christian Church fully accords with the teachings of St.

Paul. 'If there was any doubt in regard to the meaning of language so plain Church history furnishes a practical commentary. Women were never allowed to officiate as ministers of the gospel by any of the orthodox and historical denominations. Women could only enter the outer court of the Temple under the Jewish economy. They never dared to enter the court of the priests where sacrifice and incense were offered by the anointed servants of the Lord. Miriam, the talented and ambitious sister of Aaron and Moses, once undertook to perform some sort of priestly functions in public, see Numbers 12. But she was smitten with leprosy in the very act and banished from the camp seven days. The Lord only healed her in response to the prayer of Moses, whose official character she had disputed.

In the synagogue worship women were never allowed to enter the main part of the sanctuary much less were they allowed to officiate as leaders in the public worship of the great Jehovah. Huldah, Deborah, Anna and the four daughters of Philip are said to have prophesied. They are extraordinary and exceptional cases. In thousands of years among hundreds of millions of God's covenant people a few rare cases of women acting as prophets are mentioned. And we are not informed precisely in regard to the manner of exercising their prophetic talents. One thing is certain, however, that it was done in a comparatively private way without violating the strict rules regulating public worship in the temple, synagogue and Christian sanctuary.

The Jews did not permit women to speak or ask questions in their public assemblies. Hence there was no need to give special prohibitions to Jewish converts as there was to Greek converts on the subject of women preaching. The fearful judgment which came upon Miriam was a solemn warning to Hebrew women throughout all generations "not to usurp authority," which the Almighty in infinite wisdom had entrusted to man as head of the family and official leader in the church. See Numbers 12: 1, etc., Deut 24: 8-9.

Among all the gracious acts and words of Jesus in behalf of

woman it is significant that He nowhere authorizes them to preach or officiate as public ministers of the gospel. There was no woman among the 70 disciples whom He sent out to proclaim the kingdom of heaven to be at hand. There was no woman among the 12 Apostles. So far as the common blessings and privileges of the gospel are concerned there is in Christ Jesus neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female. All stand upon a common platform of gracious privilege. But the case is different as regards the official or representative functions of the gospel ministry. For wise reasons the Lord forbids woman from arrogating or usurping these. It will not do to affirm as some do that Paul's prohibition was only temporary and intended merely to apply to ignorant and fanatical converts just emerging from heathenism. He makes no exception even in writing to communities embracing among their female members such devoted and intelligent women as Phoebe and Priscilla.

We believe that the Apostles of our Lord, and that St. Paul in particular was inspired by the Holy Ghost to lay broad and deep the practical, doctrinal and ethical foundations of our holy religion.

All legitimate progress must be in the line of consistency with their acts and teachings. No age can outgrow or be absolved from obedience to the great principles of Christian faith and practice laid down by St. Paul.

St. Peter says that in the epistles of St. Paul are some things hard to be understood which those who are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. Certainly the position of Paul on the question of woman's right to officiate or take a leading part in public services of the sanctuary is not one of those things that are hard to be understood. Plain and explicit, clear and unmistakable, are his deliverances on this point. Moreover, he tells us expressly that on this head he communicates the commandments of the Lord, and further, that all genuine prophetic or spiritual-minded persons will admit this fact. See 1 Cor. 14: 37.

Whether or not we can understand the grounds or propriety of his emphatic prohibition of women praying or speaking in Christian assemblies, certain it is that such is his teaching, not merely in incidental or inferential form, but in the most explicit and didactic terms. Nor is it merely a local or temporary advice, but a general and permanent prohibition for all lands and for all times.

It is the part of duty and wisdom for us to bow in faithful submission to the oracles of the living God. It is no answer to say that women preachers have many seals to their ministry. Bad men are often very successful in making converts by resorting to sensational appliances. Mormon evangelists even are said to produce the same phenomena among the ignorant populace in England, Wales, etc., that frequently attend the ministrations of enthusiastic revivalists in Christian and American communities. The devil himself at times puts on the garb of an angel of light. Success in the popular sense of the term is not a criterion of truth and right. Impostors are frequently most successful as the world goes. It is required of a man and especially of a minister of Christ that he be found faithful, faithful to the claims of truth and duty amid good and evil report. The meed of genuine success may seem to be withheld for a season by the Judge of the earth. But in the end He will do right and render to each and all according to their works. The Quakers have had numerous female preachers and exhorters, but every one of the old historical orthodox denominations have flourished more than the Quaker sect, although the orthodox bodies obeyed the injunction of the great Apostle and forbade women to speak in the church.

Whatever is clearly Scriptural is right and for the best interests of society, whether we can fully understand it or not.

Our appeal should be to the law and testimony. If a man speak not according to this word it is because there is no light in him. Sentimental feelings and preconceived notions must be laid on the altar of our common Lord and Saviour. Christianity has done great things for woman and woman has done great

things for Christianity. Her true welfare and safety are to be found in imitating the pious and modest example of the godly matrons of old rather than in presumptuously pressing into positions in Church and State which God and nature never intended that she should occupy. Nor have we yet found any trouble in impressing these facts upon sensible, pious, orthodox women. There is plenty of room for all faithful female helpers in the vineyard of the Lord, without violating any Apostolic injunction. They are the best friends of woman who honestly and earnestly point out the path which divine wisdom has made for her to walk in. The great need of our age and country is mothers, pious, Christian mothers who will be "keepers at home," see Titus 2: 5, and bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, who will cultivate the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price, rather than adorn themselves with gold or pearls or costly array, or seek to usurp authority given to man.